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## The Role of Higher Education in Addressing the Needs of Diverse Student Populations in Pakistan

**Dr. Shakeel Ahmed**

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Balochistan, Quetta

**Amina Hanif Tarar**

Assistant Professor Psychology, GC University Lahore

**Dr. Muhammad Ali Tarar**

Associate Professor/ Chairman, Department of Sociology Ghazi University Dera Ghazi Khan

[mtarar@gudgk.edu.pk](mailto:mtarar@gudgk.edu.pk)

**Dr. Shams Wazir**

Lecturer Persian, Department of Education, Government Girls Degree College Brewery Road Quetta

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### ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study examined how higher education institutions in Pakistan address the needs of diverse student populations across five major cities. Using purposive sampling, data was collected from 600 students representing ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged groups, and first-generation university students across 20 universities. Quantitative analysis revealed significant disparities in institutional support services, with private universities demonstrating higher satisfaction rates ( $M=3.8$ ,  $SD=0.9$ ) compared to public institutions ( $M=3.2$ ,  $SD=1.1$ ). Students with disabilities reported the lowest satisfaction levels with accommodation services ( $M=2.9$ ,  $SD=1.2$ ), while ethnic minorities expressed moderate satisfaction with cultural inclusion initiatives ( $M=3.4$ ,  $SD=1.0$ ). Qualitative findings identified systemic barriers including inadequate infrastructure, limited financial aid, and insufficient faculty training in diversity and inclusion. The study reveals that while Pakistani higher education institutions have made progress in enrolling diverse students, significant gaps remain in providing comprehensive support services. Recommendations include

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enhanced accessibility infrastructure, expanded financial aid programs, and mandatory diversity training for faculty and staff.

**Keywords:** Higher education, diversity, inclusion, Pakistan, student support services, accessibility, ethnic minorities

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## INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's higher education landscape has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, with enrollment rates increasing from 2.6% in 2002 to 10.8% in 2024 (Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2024). This expansion has brought unprecedented opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds, including ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged groups, and first-generation university students. However, the mere increase in enrollment numbers does not guarantee equitable access to quality education or adequate support services for these diverse populations (Ahmad & Khan, 2023).

The concept of diversity in higher education encompasses multiple dimensions including socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, and first-generation college status. In Pakistan's context, this diversity is particularly complex given the country's multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious composition. The four provinces of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan each present unique cultural and linguistic characteristics that influence students' educational experiences (Mahmood et al., 2022). Additionally, the federal territories and tribal areas contribute to the rich tapestry of Pakistan's demographic diversity, each bringing distinct challenges and opportunities in higher education.

Research indicates that diverse student populations often face multiple barriers in accessing and succeeding in higher education. These barriers range from financial constraints and inadequate academic preparation to cultural misalignment and insufficient institutional support (Shah & Ali, 2021). Students with disabilities, for instance, encounter physical accessibility challenges, lack of assistive technologies, and limited awareness among faculty about inclusive teaching practices. Similarly, ethnic minorities may experience cultural isolation, language barriers, and discrimination that can significantly impact their academic performance and overall university experience.

The role of higher education institutions in addressing these challenges has become increasingly critical as Pakistan strives to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education. Universities are expected to serve not only as centers of learning but also as catalysts for social mobility and inclusion (Hassan & Ahmed, 2023). This expectation requires institutions to develop comprehensive support systems that address the diverse needs of their student populations while maintaining academic excellence and fostering an inclusive campus environment.

Current literature suggests that successful diversity initiatives in higher education require a multi-faceted approach that includes policy development,

infrastructure improvement, faculty training, and continuous assessment of outcomes (Rizvi et al., 2022). However, most existing studies on diversity in Pakistani higher education have been limited in scope, focusing on single institutions or specific demographic groups. There is a significant gap in comprehensive research that examines the experiences of diverse student populations across multiple universities and regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted existing inequalities in higher education access and support services. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds faced disproportionate challenges in accessing online learning platforms, while those with disabilities encountered additional barriers in navigating digital learning environments (Qadir & Hussain, 2023). These experiences have underscored the urgent need for higher education institutions to develop more robust and inclusive support systems that can address diverse student needs across various circumstances.

Economic factors play a crucial role in shaping access to higher education for diverse populations. Despite various scholarship programs and financial aid initiatives, many students from low-income families struggle to afford university education. The cost of education, including tuition fees, accommodation, and living expenses, remains a significant barrier for economically disadvantaged students (Tariq & Bhatti, 2024). Furthermore, the opportunity cost of pursuing higher education, particularly for families' dependent on their children's earnings, adds another layer of complexity to the economic challenges faced by diverse student populations.

The geographical distribution of higher education institutions across Pakistan also presents unique challenges for students from remote and rural areas. Many universities are concentrated in major urban centers, requiring students from rural backgrounds to relocate and adapt to urban environments while pursuing their education. This transition often involves significant cultural adjustments and additional financial burdens that can impact academic performance and overall well-being (Siddiq et al., 2023).

Gender dynamics within diverse student populations add another dimension to the complexity of higher education access and support. While overall female enrollment in Pakistani universities has increased significantly, women from certain ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face specific challenges related to cultural expectations, safety concerns, and limited family support for higher education pursuits (Fatima & Rehman, 2022).

The quality of support services provided by higher education institutions varies considerably across public and private universities. While some institutions have invested heavily in diversity and inclusion initiatives, others lag behind in providing adequate support for diverse student populations. This disparity in service quality and availability creates unequal opportunities for students depending on their institutional affiliation and financial capacity to access higher-quality education (Nawaz et al., 2021).

### **Research Objectives**

1. To assess the current state of institutional support services for diverse student populations in Pakistani higher education institutions
2. To identify the key challenges and barriers faced by diverse students in accessing and succeeding in higher education
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing diversity and inclusion initiatives in promoting equitable educational outcomes

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of satisfaction among diverse student populations with institutional support services in Pakistani universities?
2. What are the primary barriers that prevent diverse students from fully accessing and benefiting from higher education opportunities?
3. How do diversity and inclusion initiatives impact the academic success and overall experience of diverse student populations?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study holds significant importance for multiple stakeholders in Pakistan's higher education sector. For policymakers, it provides empirical evidence to inform the development of more inclusive higher education policies and resource allocation strategies. The findings will help identify gaps in current support systems and guide the implementation of evidence-based interventions to address the needs of diverse student populations. For university administrators and faculty, the study offers insights into effective practices for creating inclusive campus environments and developing targeted support services. The research also contributes to the broader academic discourse on diversity and inclusion in higher education, particularly in the context of developing countries with complex demographic compositions. By highlighting the experiences of diverse student populations, this study can inform best practices that may be applicable to similar contexts in South Asian and other developing regions.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature on diversity in higher education has evolved significantly over the past decade, with increasing attention to the experiences of underrepresented student populations. International research has consistently demonstrated that diverse student bodies contribute to enhanced learning outcomes, improved critical thinking skills, and better preparation for global citizenship (Chang et al., 2021). However, the mere presence of diversity does not automatically translate into inclusive educational environments or equitable outcomes for all students.

Studies conducted in Western contexts have identified several key factors that influence the success of diverse student populations in higher education. These include institutional commitment to diversity, availability of support services, faculty awareness and training, peer interactions, and campus climate (Williams & Brown, 2022). Research has shown that students from underrepresented groups often face additional challenges such as stereotype threat, imposter syndrome, and

cultural mismatch that can negatively impact their academic performance and persistence rates.

In the context of developing countries, research on diversity in higher education has gained momentum, with scholars examining how cultural, economic, and social factors influence access and success for diverse student populations. Studies from South Asian countries have highlighted the importance of addressing structural inequalities and systemic barriers that prevent marginalized groups from fully participating in higher education (Gupta & Sharma, 2023). These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive approaches that address both individual and institutional factors contributing to educational inequality.

Pakistani research on higher education diversity has primarily focused on gender disparities and rural-urban differences in enrollment patterns. Studies have documented significant progress in female enrollment rates across all provinces, with women now constituting over 50% of university students in many institutions (Ali et al., 2022). However, research has also revealed persistent challenges related to gender-based discrimination, safety concerns, and limited career opportunities for female graduates, particularly in conservative regions.

The experiences of students with disabilities in Pakistani higher education have received limited attention in academic literature. Existing studies have identified significant barriers including physical inaccessibility, lack of assistive technologies, and insufficient awareness among faculty about inclusive teaching practices (Rehman & Hassan, 2021). These findings highlight the need for comprehensive disability support services and policy reforms to ensure equal access to higher education for students with disabilities.

Economic factors have been consistently identified as major determinants of higher education access for diverse populations in Pakistan. Research has shown that students from low-income families face multiple financial barriers including direct costs of education, opportunity costs of foregone earnings, and indirect costs such as transportation and accommodation (Khan et al., 2023). Studies have also revealed that existing financial aid programs often fail to reach the most disadvantaged students due to complex application processes and limited awareness about available opportunities.

The role of first-generation college students in Pakistani higher education has emerged as an important area of research. Studies have found that these students often lack cultural capital and family support systems that facilitate university success, leading to higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement compared to their peers from college-educated families (Malik & Ahmed, 2022). Research has emphasized the need for targeted support services that address the unique challenges faced by first-generation students.

Language barriers represent another significant challenge for diverse student populations in Pakistani universities. While English serves as the primary medium of instruction in most higher education institutions, many students from regional and rural backgrounds struggle with English proficiency, affecting their academic

performance and participation in classroom activities (Hussain et al., 2021). Studies have highlighted the need for language support programs and multilingual teaching approaches to address these challenges.

Cultural diversity within Pakistani higher education institutions has been examined through the lens of ethnic and religious minorities. Research has revealed that students from minority backgrounds often experience cultural isolation, discrimination, and limited representation in curriculum and campus activities (Zafar & Khan, 2023). These findings suggest the need for culturally responsive teaching practices and inclusive campus environments that celebrate diversity.

The impact of urbanization on higher education access has been explored in several studies, with researchers noting that students from rural areas face unique challenges in adapting to urban university environments. These challenges include cultural adjustment, financial constraints, and limited social support networks (Sadiq et al., 2022). Research has emphasized the importance of orientation programs and peer mentoring systems to support rural students' transition to university life.

Mental health and psychological well-being of diverse student populations have gained increasing attention in recent literature. Studies have found that students from marginalized backgrounds often experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to their peers, which can negatively impact their academic performance and overall university experience (Iqbal & Rafique, 2021). Research has highlighted the need for culturally sensitive mental health services and support systems.

The effectiveness of diversity and inclusion initiatives in Pakistani higher education has been evaluated in several studies. Research has found that while many institutions have implemented various programs to support diverse students, the impact of these initiatives remains limited due to inadequate resources, lack of systematic evaluation, and insufficient institutional commitment (Noor et al., 2023). Studies have emphasized the need for comprehensive approaches that address both structural and cultural barriers to inclusion.

## Results and Data Analysis

### Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis of the study involved 600 participants across 20 universities in five major cities of Pakistan. The demographic distribution showed that 38% of participants were from ethnic minorities, 15% were students with disabilities, 28% were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and 19% were first-generation university students.

**Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Participants**

Demographic Category	Frequency	Percentage
Ethnic Minorities	228	38%
Students with Disabilities	90	15%
Economically Disadvantaged	168	28%
First-Generation Students	114	19%
Total	600	100%

Table 1 illustrates the diverse composition of the study sample, ensuring adequate representation across different demographic groups. The high percentage of ethnic minorities reflects Pakistan's multicultural composition, while the inclusion of students with disabilities, though representing a smaller percentage, provides valuable insights into accessibility challenges. The significant representation of economically disadvantaged students highlights the socioeconomic diversity within Pakistani higher education institutions.

**Table 2: Satisfaction with Institutional Support Services by University Type**

University Type	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Sample Size
Public Universities	3.2	1.1	360
Private Universities	3.8	0.9	240
Overall	3.4	1.0	600

Table 2 reveals a significant difference in satisfaction levels between public and private universities. Private universities demonstrated higher satisfaction rates (M=3.8, SD=0.9) compared to public institutions (M=3.2, SD=1.1). This difference suggests that private universities may have better resources and more personalized support services for diverse student populations. The smaller standard deviation for private universities indicates more consistent service quality across different institutions.

**Table 3: Satisfaction Levels by Demographic Group**

Demographic Group	Academic Support	Financial Aid	Cultural Inclusion	Accessibility Services
Ethnic Minorities	3.4 ± 1.0	3.1 ± 1.2	3.6 ± 0.9	N/A
Students with Disabilities	3.0 ± 1.1	3.3 ± 1.0	3.2 ± 1.1	2.9 ± 1.2
Economically Disadvantaged	3.3 ± 1.0	2.8 ± 1.3	3.4 ± 1.0	N/A
First-Generation Students	3.1 ± 1.1	3.2 ± 1.1	3.3 ± 1.0	N/A

Note: Scores are on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Very Dissatisfied, 5=Very Satisfied)

Table 3 provides detailed satisfaction levels across different support service categories for each demographic group. Students with disabilities reported the lowest satisfaction with accessibility services (M=2.9, SD=1.2), indicating significant gaps in infrastructure and support systems. Economically disadvantaged students expressed the lowest satisfaction with financial aid services (M=2.8, SD=1.3), suggesting inadequate financial support mechanisms. Ethnic minorities showed relatively higher satisfaction with cultural inclusion initiatives (M=3.6, SD=0.9), though there remains room for improvement.

**Table 4: Barriers to Higher Education Access by Demographic Group**

Barrier Type	Ethnic Minorities	Students with Disabilities	Economically Disadvantaged	First-Generation Students
Financial Constraints	72%	68%	89%	71%
Academic Preparation	45%	52%	58%	67%
Cultural Barriers	61%	34%	42%	55%
Physical Accessibility	23%	87%	28%	31%
Language Barriers	58%	41%	39%	48%
Discrimination	49%	56%	31%	25%

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of students in each group who identified the barrier as significant

Table 4 highlights the most significant barriers faced by different demographic groups. Financial constraints emerge as a universal challenge, affecting 89% of economically disadvantaged students and over 68% of all other groups. Students with disabilities face the highest levels of physical accessibility barriers (87%) and discrimination (56%). Academic preparation challenges are most pronounced among first-generation students (67%), reflecting the impact of limited family educational background on student preparedness.

**Table 5: Academic Performance Indicators by Demographic Group**

Performance Indicator	Ethnic Minorities	Students with Disabilities	Economically Disadvantaged	First-Generation Students	Overall Average
GPA (Mean $\pm$ SD)	3.1 $\pm$ 0.8	2.9 $\pm$ 0.9	3.0 $\pm$ 0.9	2.8 $\pm$ 1.0	3.0 $\pm$ 0.9
Retention Rate (%)	82%	76%	79%	74%	78%
Graduation Rate (%)	71%	65%	68%	62%	67%
Time to Graduation (Years)	4.2 $\pm$ 0.8	4.6 $\pm$ 1.2	4.3 $\pm$ 0.9	4.5 $\pm$ 1.1	4.4 $\pm$ 1.0

Table 5 presents academic performance indicators across different demographic groups. First-generation students show the lowest performance across all indicators, with the lowest GPA (2.8  $\pm$  1.0), retention rate (74%), and graduation rate (62%). Students with disabilities demonstrate longer time to graduation (4.6  $\pm$  1.2 years) and lower retention rates (76%), indicating the need for enhanced support services. These performance gaps highlight the importance of targeted interventions for different demographic groups.

**Table 6: Utilization of Support Services by Demographic Group**

<b>Support Service</b>	<b>Ethnic Minorities</b>	<b>Students with Disabilities</b>	<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	<b>First-Generation Students</b>
Academic Counseling	45%	62%	52%	58%
Financial Aid Services	51%	68%	78%	64%
Career Services	38%	41%	43%	35%
Mental Health Services	29%	47%	34%	31%
Tutoring Services	42%	55%	48%	61%
Peer Mentoring	35%	38%	41%	52%

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of students in each group who utilized the service

Table 6 shows utilization rates of various support services across demographic groups. Students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students show higher utilization rates for most services, reflecting their greater need for institutional support. First-generation students demonstrate high utilization of tutoring services (61%) and peer mentoring (52%), indicating the importance of academic and social support for this population. The relatively low utilization of mental health services across all groups suggests either limited availability or stigma associated with mental health support.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

The qualitative analysis of interviews and focus group discussions revealed several key themes that provide deeper insights into the experiences of diverse student populations in Pakistani higher education institutions.

#### **Theme 1: Institutional Commitment and Leadership**

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion. A senior administrator from a private university noted: "Leadership commitment is crucial. When the vice-chancellor actively supports diversity initiatives, it creates a ripple effect throughout the institution." However, many participants from public universities expressed concerns about inconsistent leadership support and limited resource allocation for diversity programs.

Students highlighted the difference between institutions with strong diversity leadership and those without. A first-generation student from Karachi mentioned: "In my university, the diversity office is just a small room with one person. They try their best, but it's not enough for all the students who need help."

## **Theme 2: Infrastructure and Physical Accessibility**

Physical accessibility emerged as a critical concern, particularly for students with disabilities. A student with mobility impairment from Lahore explained: "Most buildings have stairs, no ramps, and even when there are ramps, they're too steep. I've missed classes because I couldn't access the building."

Faculty members acknowledged the infrastructure challenges but noted resource constraints. A department head from a public university stated: "We want to make our campus accessible, but renovation costs are enormous, and we don't have the budget."

## **Theme 3: Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusion**

Ethnic minority students reported mixed experiences regarding cultural inclusion. A student from Balochistan studying in Karachi shared: "Sometimes I feel like an outsider. The teaching is only in Urdu and English, and my cultural background isn't represented in the curriculum."

However, some institutions demonstrated better cultural sensitivity. A student affairs officer mentioned: "We've started celebrating different cultural festivals and including diverse perspectives in our curriculum. It's made a real difference in how minority students feel about belonging here."

## **Theme 4: Financial Support and Economic Barriers**

Financial constraints were universally identified as the most significant barrier to higher education access. An economically disadvantaged student from Peshawar explained: "I work part-time to support my family and pay for my studies. It's exhausting, and my grades suffer because I can't focus on studies alone."

Faculty members expressed concern about the impact of financial stress on student performance. A professor noted: "I can tell which students are struggling financially. They're often tired, miss classes due to work, and can't afford textbooks or other resources."

## **Theme 5: Academic Preparation and Support**

First-generation students particularly emphasized the challenges related to academic preparation and navigation of university systems. A student from a rural area shared: "No one in my family went to university, so I didn't know how to register for classes, use the library, or even how to study effectively at this level."

Academic support services were viewed as crucial but often inadequate. A student counselor mentioned: "We have hundreds of students who need academic support, but we only have a few staff members. The demand far exceeds our capacity."

## **Theme 6: Discrimination and Social Integration**

Experiences of discrimination varied across institutions and demographic groups. Students with disabilities reported both overt and subtle forms of discrimination. A visually impaired student shared: "Some professors don't know how to accommodate my needs, and classmates sometimes avoid group work with me."

Ethnic minority students reported similar experiences, with some facing discrimination based on their regional background or language. However, positive

peer interactions were also common, with many students describing supportive relationships with classmates from different backgrounds.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a complex landscape of diversity and inclusion in Pakistani higher education, characterized by both progress and persistent challenges. The quantitative data demonstrates significant disparities in satisfaction levels between public and private universities, with private institutions consistently outperforming public universities in providing support services for diverse student populations. This disparity can be attributed to several factors including resource availability, administrative flexibility, and institutional priorities (Ahmad & Khan, 2023).

The particularly low satisfaction levels among students with disabilities regarding accessibility services highlight a critical gap in Pakistan's higher education infrastructure. Despite legal frameworks requiring accessibility, the implementation remains inadequate, reflecting broader societal challenges in addressing disability rights and inclusion (Rehman & Hassan, 2021). The qualitative findings support this quantitative data, with students with disabilities reporting significant barriers to physical access and academic accommodation.

The financial barriers identified across all demographic groups underscore the urgent need for comprehensive financial aid reform in Pakistani higher education. While various scholarship programs exist, the data suggests that current financial support mechanisms are insufficient to address the needs of economically disadvantaged students. This finding aligns with recent research indicating that financial constraints remain the primary barrier to higher education access in developing countries (Tariq & Bhatti, 2024). The high utilization rates of financial aid services among economically disadvantaged students, combined with their low satisfaction levels, suggests that while students are seeking help, the available support is inadequate to meet their needs.

## CONCLUSION

This comprehensive study of diversity and inclusion in Pakistani higher education reveals a system in transition, with significant progress in enrollment diversity but persistent challenges in providing equitable support services. The findings demonstrate that while Pakistani universities have successfully increased access for diverse student populations, substantial gaps remain in creating truly inclusive educational environments that support the success of all students.

The disparity between public and private institutions in supporting diverse students highlights the need for systemic reforms that address resource allocation and institutional capacity. The consistently higher satisfaction levels in private universities suggest that with adequate resources and institutional commitment, Pakistani higher education institutions can effectively serve diverse student populations. However, the concentration of quality support services in private

institutions raises concerns about equity and access, as many students from disadvantaged backgrounds may not be able to afford private education.

The study's findings regarding students with disabilities are particularly concerning, revealing widespread inadequacies in accessibility infrastructure and support services. This situation not only violates principles of inclusive education but also represents a significant waste of human potential. The low academic performance indicators and high dropout rates among students with disabilities suggest that current approaches to disability support are insufficient and require comprehensive reform.

The experiences of first-generation students highlight the importance of addressing not only financial barriers but also cultural and social capital deficits that can impede university success. These students require comprehensive support that goes beyond financial aid to include academic preparation, social integration, and navigation of university systems. The study's findings suggest that targeted interventions for first-generation students could significantly improve their academic outcomes and overall university experience.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the study findings, several key recommendations emerge for improving diversity and inclusion in Pakistani higher education. First, institutions should establish dedicated diversity and inclusion offices with adequate funding and staff to coordinate comprehensive support services. These offices should develop systematic approaches to identifying and addressing the needs of diverse student populations. Second, universities must invest in accessibility infrastructure and assistive technologies to ensure equal access for students with disabilities. This includes not only physical modifications but also training for faculty and staff on inclusive teaching practices and disability awareness. Third, financial aid programs should be expanded and reformed to provide more comprehensive support for economically disadvantaged students, including not only tuition assistance but also support for living expenses, textbooks, and other educational resources. Fourth, institutions should implement mandatory diversity and inclusion training for all faculty and staff to enhance cultural competency and awareness of diverse student needs. Finally, universities should establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems to track the effectiveness of diversity initiatives and ensure continuous improvement in support services.

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